UNITED NATIONS

General Assembly

FIFTIETH SESSION

Official Records

SPECIAL POLITICAL AND
DECOLONIZATION COMMITTEE
(FOURTH COMMITTEE)
12th meeting
held on
Monday, 30 October 1995
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 12th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. MUTHAURA (Kenya)

CONTENTS

AGENDA ITEM 84: UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of the publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-794, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.

Distr. GENERAL
A/C.4/50/SR.12
6 November 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

95-81870 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.20 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 84: UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (A/50/13/Add.1, Add.1/Corr.1 and Add.1/Corr.2 (Arabic only), A/50/82-S/1995/135, A/50/159-S/1995/312, A/50/168-S/1995/341, A/50/428, A/50/450, A/50/451, A/50/491, A/50/500 and A/50/531)

1. Mr. TÜRKMEN (Commissioner-General, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)), presenting his annual report on the work of the Agency (A/50/13) covering the period from July 1994 to June 1995, he said the search for peace in the Middle East had reached a milestone with the signing in September 1995 by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of the interim agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. However, while the search for a lasting solution continued, it was important not to forget the plight of over 3 million Palestine refugees. He paid a special tribute to the many Palestinians among the UNRWA staff for their exceptional dedication and valiant efforts in extremely trying circumstances. UNRWA was operating in a difficult transitional period where great hope was mingled with uncertainty and concern.

2. As the Palestinian Authority had taken greater responsibility for health, education and social services, it had become the Agency's exclusive interlocutor in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The spirit of cooperation and mutual support between the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA was very gratifying, but the support of the Israeli authorities, who controlled the area, was also needed. Despite the Agency's continuing good relations with the Israeli Government, its operations had never been so hampered as they were now. It was worth recalling the extent of those operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip: UNRWA operated schools, health centres, training centres and a hospital, and supported youth centres and centres for women's programmes and community rehabilitation, as well as providing emergency assistance to the most needy refugees. The vast majority of its staff were locally recruited Palestinians. Since the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements had been signed in 1993, the combined presence of UNRWA and other United Nations agencies had expanded considerably, and UNRWA's expenditure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip accounted for almost half of the Palestinian Authority's projected annual expenditure. The European Union was also a major donor. UNRWA attached great importance to cooperation with other United Nations agencies and the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories to support the peace process. The Special Coordinator's presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip had added a crucial dimension to the Organization's efforts in the region. UNRWA was also active in the multilateral approach to the peace process, attending meetings of the Multilateral Working Group on Refugees and those of the Local Aid Coordinating Committee, providing the secretariat for the latter's working group on the environment.

3. In the light of the deep concerns of the Palestine refugee community and Agency staff about the future of UNRWA, the meeting in Amman earlier in the year of the Agency's major donors, host Governments and Advisory Commission members had been pivotal. There had been agreement that it would be premature to place a time-limit on the existence of UNRWA as the Agency would continue to be of

vital importance until a political solution to the refugee problem was found, and support had been expressed for the Agency's Peace Implementation Programme and its focus on the harmonization of services. The Agency's financial requirements for the coming years had been clarified and, although uncertainties remained, a consensus had emerged on the nature of its mission in the medium term.

4. International support for the peace process had resulted in heightened interest by donors in funding the Agency's projects. That interest was opportune, as the Agency's planned expenditure on projects in 1995 was more than 10 times its actual expenditure in 1991. There had been an excellent response from donors to the Peace Implementation Programme, which aimed at showing the refugee community the tangible benefits of the peace process, through investment in infrastructure, income-generation and job creation. There had been massive investment in the construction, repair, maintenance and provision of schools, health centres, shelters, centres for women's programmes and community rehabilitation, garbage depository sites and refuse containers. One of the Agency's most ambitious undertakings was the construction of the European Gaza Hospital, which would be the second largest in Gaza. After delays resulting from closures of the Gaza Strip, it was now due for completion in mid-1996. Its future was the subject of discussions with the Palestinian Authority, which would eventually inherit the hospital, and the European Union.

5. UNRWA attached increasing importance to income-generation activities with the aim of creating jobs and establishing sustainable income-producing activity within the refugee community. One of its most successful efforts had been the revolving loan fund for small-scale enterprises, which provided credit on a non-profit basis to Palestinian entrepreneurs; by 1997 the fund would be self-sustaining. Another revolving loan fund offered loans to women working in the informal sector in Gaza.

6. The Agency's approach to the serious health problems affecting refugees was to emphasize comprehensive planning for sustainable development and construction of water, sewerage and drainage works. A number of projects, particularly in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Lebanon fields, where the needs were greatest, were in various stages of completion. The Agency was working to define needs and identify priorities while expanding its planning, design and construction capabilities.

7. The network of women's programme centres supported by the Agency had grown significantly, with the number of participants more than doubling between 1991 and 1995. Fee-based courses had been introduced in the centres. UNRWA was evolving from a service provider to a service facilitator, and planned to achieve full community management of all its centres for women's programmes, community rehabilitation and youth activities by 1999.

8. The Agency's new family planning programme provided medical supervision to pregnant women and nursing mothers, as well as providing counselling and a wide range of contraceptive methods. The number of UNRWA health units offering family planning services had more than doubled in the last three years.

9. In 1995, UNRWA had launched the Organization Development Initiative, a management development programme which it was hoped would not only enhance the professionalism of Agency staff but also facilitate the eventual handover of services and contribute to the general development of Palestinian human resources.

10. The Agency had given assistance in various forms to the Palestinian Authority, providing schooling and medical and housing assistance for returning refugee families and released detainees. The Agency was working to improve and expand the infrastructure the Palestinian Authority had taken over from the Israeli civil administration, building one new secondary school, and maintaining or improving existing schools, garbage depository sites and water and sewerage systems. It had also, at the request of the Secretary-General, paid members of the Palestinian Police Force from funds contributed by donors. The main goal of the Agency's contacts with the Palestinian Authority was the harmonization of services to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication, thus laying the groundwork for an eventual handover of services in the education, health and relief and social services sectors.

11. UNRWA was closely monitoring the situation of Palestinians expelled from the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, and was ready to provide humanitarian services to those Palestinian refugees registered with the Agency in its area of operations. It was already providing medical attention, blankets and baby food to Palestinians stranded between Egypt and Gaza, and had sent a mission, in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Saloum camp on the Libyan-Egyptian border to assess the situation of the refugees.

12. The financial position of UNRWA was a matter of serious concern. The current fiscal year would be the third consecutive year to end with a shortfall, despite continuing austerity and cost-saving measures. However, the Agency aimed at maintaining the traditional rate of increase of 5 per cent a year, despite new demands on its resources. Among those demands was the need to make an annual allocation in the regular budget to create a fund for termination indemnities. The budget continued to be an austerity budget, and the Agency's resources were overstretched; the Secretary-General of the Arab League had been asked to approach Arab donors with a request that they should raise their contribution from 1 per cent to 3 per cent of the budget.

13. The relocation of the Agency's Vienna headquarters to the Gaza Strip was proceeding apace, with construction work beginning on a new headquarters building in Gaza; almost half of the budgeted cost had been covered by pledges and contributions. Meanwhile, a number of operational units had been successfully relocated to Amman.

14. Restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities had led to serious restraints on the Agency's operations in the occupied territory. The restrictions were especially strict for the Agency's Palestinian staff but senior international staff had also experienced problems. UNRWA vehicles were frequently searched at the Erez checkpoint between Gaza and Israel, and its diplomatic pouch had been inspected. It sometimes seemed that UNRWA vehicles were being detained while those of other international organizations were

allowed to pass. Restrictions on movement, even within the Gaza Strip, were becoming ever tighter, and that did not bode well for the forthcoming headquarters move. If present Israeli practices continued, the Agency would not be able to carry out its operations in Gaza and the West Bank; nor would it be able to transfer its headquarters, as requested in General Assembly resolution 49/35 A (1994), without suffering serious adverse effects on its operations. The Commissioner-General had written to the Israeli Foreign Minister expressing his serious concerns about the restrictions imposed on UNRWA staff, and had received a reply written in a constructive spirit, which he hoped would allow a modus operandi to be worked out urgently.

15. UNRWA was in the contradictory position of planning for its own eventual dissolution while expanding its programmes and operations. A lot had been achieved, and the Agency had acquired a new dimension as it responded to the call of the General Assembly "to continue to contribute towards the development of economic and social stability in the occupied territory". In its critical mission at a time of historic transition, UNRWA deserved the full support of the General Assembly, concerned countries and all donor States.

16. Mr. AASS (Norway), introducing the report of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA (A/50/491) said that in view of the $6 million deficit with which the Agency had begun 1995, the financial prospects for the year had not been favourable. In meetings with major donors and representatives of other concerned Governments, the Commissioner-General had once again appealed for help.

17. The past year had continued to see dramatic and positive political developments in the area in which UNRWA operated, and the major parties to the peace process as well as the major donors had asked UNRWA to play a role in helping to effect improvements in the social and economic spheres. The eventual phasing-out of UNRWA as the political process unfolded, however, had raised the issue of termination indemnities, and donors had agreed that the Agency should begin to include a provision for them in its budget. The donors had also stipulated that the cost of relocating UNRWA headquarters to the Gaza Strip should not in any way be financed out of the regular budget or established project resources; to date, however, there was a considerable shortfall in the special fund established by the Agency to cover the costs of the move.

18. The Working Group was concerned to note that UNRWA had once again been able to carry out its regular activities only by drawing on its working capital reserves in 1994, and that it expected to have another shortfall in its budget in 1995. It shared the Commissioner-General's concern that the activities forming the core of UNRWA services to Palestine refugees were increasingly vulnerable owing to such chronic budget deficits, which would eventually force programme reductions. It would be extremely unfortunate if the substantial social and economic benefits of the programmes were thus undermined. The Working Group therefore strongly urged all Governments that had not yet contributed to UNRWA to do so, and others to increase their contributions and to consider making additional contributions to the Peace Implementation Programme and to construction and other projects.

19. Ms. ABDELHADY (Observer for Palestine) said that item 84 went beyond UNRWA to the larger and crucial issue of the Palestine refugees - the oldest and biggest refugee problem in the world - and resolutions adopted on the item should continue to reflect that reality.

20. The Middle East peace negotiations on the refugee problem and other final status issues had been postponed to the second stage of the process. As their fate was discussed, the Palestine refugees should not be forgotten by the international community, which must safeguard their rights during the interim period.

21. Three million two hundred thousand Palestine refugees, including some of the persons displaced in 1967, remained dispersed throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, and in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and elsewhere, and were awaiting a just and comprehensive resolution of their plight on the basis of the right of repatriation or compensation, as stipulated in paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

22. Given the recent developments in the peace process, the Palestinian National Authority would soon be responsible for all populated areas in the West Bank. Already, a satisfactory and cooperative working relationship between the Authority and UNRWA had been forged, and the General Assembly decision on the relationship between the Advisory Commission of UNRWA and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had begun to be put into effect.

23. Palestine welcomed the relocation of UNRWA headquarters from Vienna to the Gaza Strip but regretted that financial constraints and administrative difficulties imposed by the Israeli authorities were delaying the transfer. It was crucial to harmonize the Agency's programmes and services with those of the Authority in the education, health, and relief and social service sectors. On the other hand, her delegation did not favour transferring the Agency's responsibilities and operations to the Authority at the current stage, for that should be part of a comprehensive political solution of the refugee problem. Until such time, UNRWA services were a crucial element in the success of the peace process and would continue to be required. It was extremely premature even to contemplate a time-limit on the Agency's existence and, indeed, its services must be maintained and improved.

24. UNRWA itself, in response to the changes produced by the peace process, had begun moving into new areas. Projects under the second phase of the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) had been exceedingly productive in generating income and creating jobs at the local level in the Agency's five fields of operation, as well as in terms of infrastructural development. Unfortunately, the Agency's ability to function was still being hampered by restrictive and punitive Israeli measures that exacerbated already difficult circumstances.

25. The situation of Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons, many of them refugees, had not been completely resolved and remained a matter of high concern. The refugee affairs officers in the field were to be commended for the legal advice and assistance they provided to safeguard the legal and human rights of refugees. Their work had been particularly important in an area where

the violence of a handful of extremist settlers was a source of great tension. Other serious problems during the period under review had been the further construction in settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, the expropriation of Palestinian lands and the demolition of Palestinian homes by the Israeli authorities.

26. After nearly 50 years of operation, UNRWA remained a beacon of hope and survival as a new era promising peace, coexistence and prosperity began to dawn.

27. Mr. BATAINEH (Jordan) said that his Government's interest in the question of the Palestine refugees was axiomatic. Jordan, being host to the largest number and having continued to absorb them incessantly since 1948 in response to each new crisis in the region, had been the country most burdened and affected by the tragedy of the Palestinian people, financially, economically and socially. The political and humanitarian dimensions of the Palestine refugee question were intertwined, whence his Government's interest in everything that concerned UNRWA operations, terms of reference and programmes. A political resolution of the refugee question was obviously central to the comprehensive and just peace settlement to which all aspired, and in the meantime UNRWA must continue to offer its full range of services.

28. Jordan shared the Commissioner-General's concern over the Agency's deteriorating financial situation which might force a curtailment of its services in 1996. The noticeable international failure to meet even the inadequate budget for the Agency's programmes had forced his Government to provide services amounting to $250 million a year directly to the refugees to satisfy their remaining needs. Any reduction in UNRWA services would consequently impose additional financial burdens on his already overburdened Government. As it was, although Jordan was host to 40 per cent of the Palestine refugees, UNRWA allocated only 20 per cent of its budget to its regional office in the country.

29. Any reduction in UNRWA services would undermine one of the pillars of the peace process. As had been recognized in General Assembly resolution 48/40, the Agency's activities, like those of the specialized agencies and the World Bank, were indispensable to the economic and social stability of the occupied territories. The Palestine refugees were one, regardless of the area in which they happened to be; their cause was one, and their basic needs were the same. The transfer of UNRWA headquarters to its area of operation could only enhance its effectiveness and operational efficiency and allow it to keep pace with the evolving needs of the Palestine refugees.

30. Mr. GNEHM (United States of America) reaffirmed his Government's full support for the work of UNRWA and for an extension of its mandate. UNRWA had been invaluable in assisting Palestine refugees at a very difficult and critical time, and its role would remain a vital one during the period of its new mandate. The United States had, as a sign of support for the transfer of its headquarters to the region, already contributed $2 million towards the move, but funding from other donors was still required to complete the process. As the largest single donor to UNRWA, the United States was pleased to note that its financial situation for 1995 indicated that its General Fund - whose growth UNRWA was rightly trying to contain - was nearly fully funded and that there had

been a strong donor response in support of its Peace Implementation Programme. UNRWA must, however, keep its expenditures within the funding levels which were made available to it.

31. UNRWA would need to adjust its operation as the peace process evolved and the needs of the Palestine refugee community changed. Increased consultation between UNRWA and the advisory and donor Governments, and the full support and cooperation of the international community, were a necessary part of the successful fulfilment of its mandate.

32. The Commissioner-General of UNRWA should be specifically commended for the dedication and professionalism he had displayed throughout his tenure during a critical time for the Palestine refugees.

33. Mr. PÉREZ-GRIFFO (Spain), speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that because the two parties directly concerned had stayed their course and remained committed to the peace process, they had continued to make heartening progress. For the first time Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had been able to manage their own affairs, albeit in limited spheres, and thousands of refugees had been able to return to those areas. Life was gradually being transformed. The redeployment of Israeli troops and the initial steps to set up the Palestinian Authority were remarkable indications of an emerging new reality in the Middle East. The holding of Palestinian elections would be a particularly important development that would reinforce the achievements thus far, and the European Union planned to contribute substantially to the organization of elections.

34. The transformations had created new tasks and challenges for UNRWA. Its long experience and its operational capability had put it in a privileged position to buttress the ongoing peace process. The Agency had been instrumental in bringing about real improvement in the social and economic conditions of Palestine refugees, despite difficult working conditions and obstacles that were still a source of concern. Its regular programmes in the education, health, and relief and social service sectors gave indispensable assistance to 3.2 million Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank, including Jericho, and the self-rule area of the Gaza Strip. UNRWA assistance was, of course, by definition temporary and could not be a substitute for a lasting political solution to the refugee problem. In the meantime, however, Agency services remained a crucial element in the success of the peace process and would continue to be required.

35. Agency operations would eventually be transferred to the Palestinian Authority at its request and the Agency's assistance to the nascent Authority as it expanded its operational and institutional capabilities was particularly welcome. Also welcome was the start of the relocation of UNRWA headquarters to the Gaza Strip, and the establishment of various Agency departments in Amman. It was very important for it to maintain its operations on behalf of Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic.

36. The member States of the European Union had again been the main contributors to the Agency in 1994, with over $179 million. Its financial situation was a matter of great concern to them. Financial shortfalls for the

third consecutive year threatened its regular programmes, sending a wrong signal to the region. The European Union called upon other States to increase their support or to begin to contribute financially to the success of the Middle East peace process. The European Union was prepared to do its share, and a convention between the Community and UNRWA was being drafted to govern the Community's contribution to the Agency for the years 1996-1998.

37. Mr. CELEM (Turkey) said that the agreement signed recently between Israel and Palestine was a decisive step towards peace and brought closer the time when the refugee problem would be resolved and UNRWA's operations transferred to the Palestinian Authority. In carrying out that transfer, however, the utmost care must be taken not to lower the quality of the services the Agency had been providing.

38. Turning to the financial situation of the Agency, he noted that there had been a gratifying response to the Peace Implementation Programme. On the other hand, the estimated deficit of UNRWA's regular budget by the last quarter of 1995 again amounted to $4 million. That recurring deficit problem put a heavy burden on the Agency's working capital, which was about to be exhausted. A second area in which contributions had fallen short was the special fund established to cover the costs of moving the Agency's headquarters from Vienna to Gaza.

39. Noting that his country had increased its contribution to the 1995 budget of UNRWA by 50 per cent compared to 1994 and had pledged $25,000 for the moving of UNRWA headquarters to Gaza, he appealed to Member States to increase their contributions to UNRWA.

40. As a country of the region which had always supported the just cause of the Palestinians, Turkey was committed to helping the efforts to achieve a full reconciliation in the region, and would support all initiatives aiming at a settlement based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

41. Mr. TAKAHASHI (Japan) welcomed the recent agreement between Israel and the Palestinians on the expansion of Palestinian interim self-rule and expressed the hope that Israel and the PLO would continue to make further efforts to advance the peace process. Under current circumstances, Japan believed that there was a real need to continue and enhance UNRWA's activities in the self-rule areas, and in particular that, during the transitional period, the Agency should continue to provide administrative assistance to the Palestinian people supplementary to the services provided by the Palestinian Authority. It should also undertake short-term projects in the self-rule areas to create employment activities and thereby increase revenues through taxation. Improvement of the living conditions of the Palestinian people and the establishment of economic independence were essential for the stability of interim self-rule. Japan welcomed the self-help efforts of the Palestinian people and called for greater financial assistance and a diversification of sources of support for those efforts.

42. Japan's Prime Minister had recently expressed his country's intention to continue to provide assistance through such international channels as UNRWA, and had in addition declared its decision to extend a portion of such assistance

directly to the Palestinians. Of the US$ 200 million in such assistance Japan had pledged in September 1993, to be disbursed over a two-year period, US$ 150 million had already been extended. In addition, Japan had in 1995 contributed US$ 2 million to cover the construction costs of the Agency's offices in Gaza and Amman and would appeal to other Governments to do likewise. It had also pledged US$ 18 million to UNRWA's regular programme budget, which was a $500,000 increase over its 1994 contribution. Of that total pledged amount, it had allocated $11 million to the Agency's General Fund, $500,000 for university scholarships for Palestine refugee students and $6.5 million to its Peace Implementation Programme projects. It had again in 1995 contributed food aid worth Y800 million to Palestinian refugees in all areas of the Agency's operations who were suffering from chronic food shortages, and would continue its programme of inviting Palestinian trainees and students to Japan and dispatching vocational training specialists to the area.

43. His delegation believed that the renewal of the Agency's mandate should be considered at the current session and that the next mandate review should be conducted close to the end of the five-year interim period outlined in the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government of 13 September 1993. Accordingly, it would be appropriate to extend the Agency's mandate for another three years, until June 1999.

44. At the same time, however, it was necessary to consider what role UNRWA was to play in the future. Clearly, greater coordination between the Agency and the Palestinian Authority was needed. His delegation therefore urged that a resolution be adopted at the current session affirming the importance of coordination and requesting the Secretary-General to devise a plan of action that would facilitate such coordination. It should be noted in that regard that UNRWA remained a works agency to provide assistance to Palestine refugees, and was not an organization for the delivery of development aid. Thus, UNRWA should strictly limit itself to short-term projects that would have an immediate effect on the Palestinian people in terms of job creation and improvements in their living standards.

45. There had recently been a proliferation of increasingly complex resolutions concerning UNRWA. His delegation believed that it was necessary during the current session to consolidate, to the extent possible, resolutions dealing with similar issues. Based on the recent progress made in the peace process, it would like to examine individual resolutions and the issues they addressed, in order to determine the most effective way of contributing to the achievement of peace in the Middle East. It therefore hoped that any draft resolution submitted would be supportive of the peace process rather than running counter to it.

46. Mr. AL-ATTAR (Syrian Arab Republic), recalling General Assembly resolution 194 (III) and in particular paragraph 11 thereof, asserted that any attempt to settle Palestine refugees in neighbouring States with a view to maintaining their current situation would violate United Nations resolutions, as well as human rights, and would not be conducive to security, peace and stability in the region. With reference to the report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, he wished to make various comments to be taken into account during the coming phase of work.

47. First, in connection with the financial and other difficulties entailed in the relocation of UNRWA headquarters to the Gaza Strip, which his delegation had opposed, he hoped that the Amman centre would be strengthened with a view to enabling the refugee host countries to attend meetings of the Advisory Commission.

48. Secondly, the austerity measures in force at UNRWA had adversely affected the quality of its services at a time when the number of refugees was increasing, meaning that it was incapable of satisfying even their most essential needs. Donor States should therefore be urged to meet their obligations and increase their contributions with a view to covering the financial deficit.

49. Thirdly, he noted the inconsistency between UNRWA policy and the further cutback in services and programmes that would occur if, as stated in paragraph 27 of the report, UNRWA's working capital were to be virtually eliminated as a result of covering that deficit.

50. Fourthly, he hoped that the proposed reduction in UNRWA's budget allocations for health and social programmes in the Syrian Arab Republic would be reviewed and subsequently increased to account for the growth in the refugee population.

51. Fifthly, the report had omitted to state that the Syrian Arab Republic shouldered enormous financial burdens in its capacity as host to Palestine refugees. He thus hoped that the next report would contain the relevant information and figures in that connection.

52. Lastly, he hoped that efforts would be made to develop the health, educational, social and medical services provided to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic by UNRWA, bearing in mind the serious impact which the austerity measures had had on those services. In conclusion, he emphasized his country's willingness to cooperate with UNRWA and his wish that United Nations resolutions would eventually be implemented so that Palestine refugees could return home, thereby ending the difficult task assigned to UNRWA.

53. Mr. ALGHAMDI (Saudi Arabia) commended UNRWA for its perseverance in endeavouring to fulfil its arduous task in the face of Israeli harassment of its staff and activities, coupled with dwindling finances, growing numbers of refugees and the requirement to provide essential needs, particularly in the fields of health and education. The latest developments in the peace process and the current negotiations between the two sides had given the Palestine refugees the hope that they would soon be able to return home. However, that hope would not be realized unless negotiations were able to progress unhindered by the obstinacy and procrastination often displayed on the part of Israel. His country continued to provide financial and moral support to UNRWA and to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and elsewhere, thus reflecting its faith in the role played by UNRWA. Finally, in connection with the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace leading to security and stability, he hoped that all peace-loving States would urge Israel to meet its obligations vis-à-vis the peace process and facilitate the return of the Palestine refugees to their homes.

54. Mr. SHAKED (Israel) noted that in the past year several additional agreements had been reached between Israel and the PLO to help bring an end to the conflict between the two peoples, the most important of them being the second interim agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority signed on 28 September 1995. In his delegation's opinion, that new agreement reflected the genuine desire of both sides to implement all of the understandings and agreements reached thus far regarding the establishment of a Palestinian interim self-rule authority and reaffirmed the desire of both sides to achieve a just, lasting, comprehensive and durable peace settlement as part of a historic reconciliation between Israel and its Arab neighbours in general.

55. His Government was currently in the process of implementing three major tasks: completing the transfer of civil powers and responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority; accomplishing within the scheduled time-frame the staged redeployment of the Israeli military forces in "Zone A" in the West Bank; and implementing all of its commitments to enable the Palestinians to hold free and democratic elections for their Council and for the chairmanship of their Executive Authority. The successful completion of those tasks was a test and a target for both Israel and the Palestinians. The current interim period was an integral part of the progression towards the next critical stage: the beginning in May 1996 of the discussions on the permanent status of the territories.

56. The Committee was aware of the difficulties accompanying the peace process and of the grave circumstances created by the continuous wave of terrorist actions by suicide bombers whose murderous acts were directed not only against innocent Israelis but against all peoples of the Middle East who hoped for a better future. Organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad were doing everything in their power to jeopardize the peace process and to challenge the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority and its leadership. UNRWA as well as other international agencies and missions in the area did not function in isolation from the environment created by such murderous acts. While every effort was being made by Israel to facilitate and assist the Agency, it requested the necessary understanding and forbearance of UNRWA. At the current fragile stage of the peace process, huge efforts were required to provide security and stability for all people in Israel and the territories alike. Under those circumstances, he would only note briefly that Israel took issue with the manner in which the annual report on UNRWA described various incidents that had occurred in the territories during the year under review, as well as with the report's inclusion of political issues beyond the scope of UNRWA's mandate.

57. In the light of the major progress achieved in recent years in the pursuit of a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, his delegation considered it more than ever essential that the Committee should focus its resolutions regarding UNRWA only on issues directly related to the Agency's humanitarian tasks and refrain from adopting resolutions relating to political issues that were irrelevant to the work for which UNRWA was responsible and detached from the new reality in the region. To that end, the number of UNRWA resolutions should be reduced to one, directly related to the Agency's humanitarian tasks. That would be more compatible with the essential need to refrain from any reference to issues such as Jerusalem, refugees and settlements that Israel and the PLO had

agreed would be dealt with bilaterally, within the framework of the permanent status negotiations.

58. Mr. AL-MUTAIRI (Kuwait) said that his delegation continued to be distressed at the poor living conditions of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank resulting from the continuation of repressive Israeli policies. The practices involved adversely affected the life of the Palestinian people and impeded the work of UNRWA especially in matters involving the restriction on movement and security measures imposed by the Israeli authorities on the Agency.

59. His delegation welcomed the recent signing of the Palestinian-Israeli interim agreement providing for the expansion of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and hoped that further positive developments would materialize on the Israeli-Syrian/Lebanese front. That should lead to a just, lasting and comprehensive peace agreement based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978), involving the principle of land for peace and Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories.

60. Kuwait supported the Middle East peace process not only symbolically but politically and economically, as was manifested by its continuing contribution of $1.5 million to the regular budget of UNRWA and the payment of $21 million, out of $25 million pledged, for the financing of development projects in the Palestinian autonomous areas. On the political front, Kuwait was participating effectively in the multilateral meetings arising out of the Middle East peace process.

61. Mr. DOUDECH (Tunisia) said that UNRWA's role was essential to ensuring that the peace process continued in an appropriate socio-economic climate. He believed, however, that its role would end only when the problem of the Palestine refugees was finally resolved in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) in the context of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of the relevant resolutions of both the Security Council and the General Assembly. However, there would be serious repercussions for the Palestine refugees and the peace process unless the difficulties facing UNRWA were overcome, in that its ongoing deficit restricted its ability to improve the lot of the growing number of those refugees. In that connection, he also regretted the obstructions to UNRWA's work in the occupied territories and hoped that such practices would cease in the run-up to the complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. The international community had an essential role to play during the current decisive period of the peace process, and it was important to increase financial support with a view to meeting the deficit and thus enabling UNRWA to fulfil more effectively its function of improving the situation of the Palestine refugees. His own country continued to support UNRWA with the interests of those refugees and the Middle East peace process in mind.

62. Mr. JELBAN (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya), speaking in exercise of the right of reply, wished to clarify the Libyan position concerning the statement of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA in connection with the Palestinians in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. The Libyan Arab Jamahiriya's support of the Palestinian people could not be surpassed, and the Palestinians in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had not been expelled; rather, they had made their own decision to leave, in which

connection it should be remembered that assistance from UNRWA could not replace their homeland. He therefore wondered why UNRWA, rather than simply helping those refugees to survive, had not helped them to return to that homeland and why there had been such opposition to their decision to do so. He further wondered why UNRWA had not protested against the fact that Jewish refugees had moved to Palestine from their original homes in Europe and why it did not appeal to the Israelis to guarantee the return of the Palestinian people to its homeland, as well as the implementation of the relevant United Nations resolutions in that respect. The answer to those questions was that many did not wish the Palestinian people to return to its homeland; instead, they wanted Palestinians to remain as refugees and to settle in Arab countries so that Palestine would belong exclusively to Israel. It was unimaginable that any solution to the Palestinian problem should not include as a prime consideration the return of the Palestinian people to its homeland, which was its inalienable right, as was its self-determination, its independence, its national sovereignty and its right to establish a homeland in the entire territory of Palestine. If UNRWA was truly concerned about the rights and humanitarian circumstances of the Palestinian people, it should guarantee and support the latter's right of return to its homeland, rather than provide mere financial support, particularly now that UNRWA was facing financial difficulties which could bring its work to a halt.

The meeting rose at 5.40 p.m.